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**Developing an Employee Engagement Framework to
Strengthen Firm Performance: A Case of an Agro-Based
Firm**

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop an Employee Engagement Framework to enhance firm performance in a ZSE-registered agro-based firm. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines quantitative assessments through a 10-point Likert scale to measure employee engagement levels and qualitative thematic analysis to explore deeper insights into employee experiences. The findings reveal that at the agro-based firm under study, employee engagement is generally moderate, with significant room for improvement, particularly in leadership quality and recognition practices. Key results indicate a positive relationship between employee engagement and organizational performance, while work-life balance emerged as a complex factor with a less direct impact on performance. The proposed Employee Engagement Framework comprises several core components: Leadership Commitment and Vision, Employee Well-being and

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Support, Culture and Values, Engagement and Participation, Technology and Tools, Professional Development and Training, and Feedback Mechanisms. By integrating these elements, the framework aims to foster a more engaged workforce, ultimately driving better organizational performance and employee satisfaction.

Key Words: employee-wellbeing; organisational performance; mixed methodology; leadership practices; Workplace Culture

Introduction

In today's fast-paced and competitive business landscape, employees are increasingly being recognized as a key driver of organizational performance. In addition to their technical skills, employees' emotional awareness, commitment, motivation and engagement in their work impacts organizational performance outcomes of productivity, innovation, and retention. Engagement, which describes employees' emotional investment and commitment to their role and organization (Kahn, 1990; Mansor et al., 2023), is now at the forefront of management discussions. Organizations have known for some time that engaged employees provide more discretionary effort, contribute to a positive culture at work, and improve overall performance. On the other hand, organizations experience disengaged employees who often demonstrate high turnover, absenteeism, and are less productive (Mazzetti, & Schaufeli, 2022).

At a global level, the world is facing a crisis with the low levels of employee engagement. Gallup (2023) recently reported only 23% of employees being engaged in their work - which leaves the rest of the majority being either disengaged or actively disengaged. Zimbabwe, on the other hand, has shown that engagement levels recently average above 72% (Musevenzo et al., 2024) and this can be viewed as both an opportunity, but also a challenge for organizations wanting to remain motivated and productive within the wider economic context. Local organizations have to contend with the realities of inflation, currency fluctuations and limited resources, all of which can have a detrimental effect on employee commitment and morale (Chinomona & Dhurup, 2017). In addition to this, collectivism and community are key contributing factors to how engagement is nurtured and maintained within the organizational landscape in Zimbabwe (Makwezi et al., 2024).

In this regard, there is an example of a Zimbabwe Stock Exchange (ZSE) registered agro-based company. The company is involved in farming, milling, retail and property development. The company significantly contributes to national food security and job creation. The company has implemented several engagement strategies, through learning and development, wellness, and recognition. Notwithstanding the efforts, the company has experienced indications of disengagement, including high turnover, absenteeism and decreased motivation (Chiduwa, et al., 2023; Tashu, Moyo, & Marumahoko, 2025). Overall, there have been engagement issues which have impacted the morale of the workforce and negatively affected the company's ability to effectively perform in the fluctuating economic climate (Maung, 2024).

The significance of employee engagement is further bolstered by both theoretical and practical perspectives. Kahn's (1990) model highlights cognitive, emotional, and physical dimensions of engagement as important to organizational effectiveness, while recent research promotes that a direct connection be associated with business performance (Despotovic, 2025). Additionally, biblical principles, such as those detailed in Colossians 3:23–24 emphasize that work be done with diligence, integrity, and with purpose, thus maintaining a values-based avenue for how to motivate employees and drive organizational culture.

With that in mind, this study set tables to develop a procedural employee engagement framework appropriate for a ZSE registered agro-based firm. The research design is structured by exploring the current state of employee engagement and its influence on the firms' performance. The study develops an organization-friendly structure to be referenced by employees and scholars alike providing an actionable answer, in part, for managers, HR Practitioners, or policy developers that could positively influence the organization's performance through manipulating employee engagement.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a review of relevant literature on employee engagement and its linkages to firm performance, with particular attention to the agro-based sector. Section 3 outlines the methodological approach adopted in the study, including the research design, data collection, and analysis techniques. Section 4 provides the presentation and discussion of results, highlighting the key findings and their implications for theory and practice. Finally, Section 5 offers the study's conclusions and recommendations,

drawing attention to practical strategies for strengthening employee engagement as a driver of firm performance, as well as suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

In academic research, a robust theoretical framework provides the necessary scaffolding upon which a study is built, offering a lens through which to interpret findings and contribute to the existing body of knowledge (Varpio et al, 2020). Based on this rationale, this study draws upon the Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory which both contribute knowledge, understanding, and insights into employee engagement and firm performance.

The Social Exchange Theory

As pioneered by Homans (1958' 1974), Blau (2017), and Emerson (1964; 2019), the Social Exchange Theory (SET) presents an appropriate theoretical framework for exploring the exchange between employees and the organization. Homans (1958; 1974) opines that SET stipulates that human social interactions are based on a cost-effective exchange of value where the organization is viewed as the source of rewards and costs and the employees are the managers of the exchange. Blau (2017) emphasizes that SET orientated employees are more likely to be engaged and exert greater levels of effort on behalf of the organization when they understand that the organization values their contribution in their work and the organization supports them in their work. This exchange signals an obligation or commitment from the employee and helps the employee to be successful in their contributions to the organization and the firm overall.

The principles of SET are relevant specifically to the context of an agro-based registered company as these companies operate in settings that have intense seasonal variations, reliance on weather conditions, and exposure to volatility in commodity prices, such as crops and livestock (Nweke, 2023). Detthamrong & Chansanam (2023) assert that employees – be it farm labourers to junior and senior managers – will generally be sensitive to the extent to which they perceive the company to be providing them with support or recognition. For example, when crop yields are low, or when there are drought conditions, then that sensitivity will increase as employees

pay attention to whether the company is reporting to be providing them with support, job security, and retraining them to stay employed. If employees at every level believe that the company cares about their welfare and their careers in agriculture – through development coaching around skills in sustainable agriculture, or exposure to resources/equipment that mitigate climate change effects, and so on – they are more likely to respond through their level of affective commitment. If employees respond positively, they are more likely to use a range of engagement strategies, which can ultimately improve productivity (e.g. improved farming techniques), job-retention (lower turnover) especially during peak seasons, increased company performance, and manage to stabilise the company for future sustainability (Ahadjie, & Dzansi, 2024).

Additionally, SET highlights trust and obligations between employees and employers as an essential part of solid relationships (Emerson, 1964; 2019). In the agricultural context, and particularly in a underdeveloped economy like Zimbabwe, those relationships are very abstract as they relate with management, labour, and local communities. Trust is especially important. Employees are willing to engage and stay engaged with an organization if they trust that the organization will keep its pledges of good wages, proper working conditions and advancement within the agricultural framework, and acts in their best interests. Trust evolves over time, when the organization handles important issues, like communicating properly about farm functions, fair and respectful labour practices, and the opportunity for growth and development in the particular skill sets required of a modern-day agricultural workforce (Zanuzzi et al., 2021).

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Employee Motivation

Complementary to SET, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory offers a more delineated understanding of the motivations and driving factors behind employee's motivation and engagement. According to Herzberg (1966; 1968), the theory distinguishes between hygiene-factors, which reduce dissatisfaction but do not actively motivate employees, and motivator-factors, which relate to the intrinsic aspects of the job and can enhance employee satisfaction and engagement.

Hygiene factors such as compensation, company policy, and working conditions, are the basic needs that need to be fulfilled before employee dissatisfaction occurs. While hygiene factors are necessary to have the workforce remain stable, they are not the motivating factors to drive high engagement or motivation levels. Conversely, motivator factors such as: achievement,

recognition, and opportunities for advancement, fulfil the need to self-actualize and serve to motivate accountability and satisfaction (Bassett-Jones & Lloyd, 2005; Herzberg, 2015).

In a ZSE registered agro-firm's framework, the hygiene and motivator factors likewise have relevance in shaping employee engagement. Provision of hygiene factors such as reasonable salary, safe working conditions and policies that take employee interests into account will likely avoid discontentment in employees and keep the workforce intact. It is without question that for a firm to engage employees and unleash their full potential, motivators must be in place for employees to advance, be recognized and have a satisfactory disposition towards work. Employees need to be engaged using motivators such as professional training and development, performance rewards systems, and meaningful contributions to the firm's strategic objectives (Hoque, 2021).

By integrating the principles of SET and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, this research develops a holistic employee engagement framework that considers the need and context of a ZSE-registered agro-based company. SET highlights the intent of reciprocal relationships and mutual investment between the firm and its employees and encourages organizations to provide and promote a supportive and stakeholder appreciative environment, encouraging employees to invest and become engaged. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory highlights the need for organizations to satisfy basic needs (hygiene factors) and motivators, in order to truly engage their workforce. While SET explained why employees might be motivated to engage (perceived benefits and obligations) and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory outlined how organizations can create conditions to promote engagement by focusing on extrinsic and intrinsic factors. This framework, which integrates the notions of social exchange dynamics and the antecedents of motivation, helps organizations in building employee engagement, increasing firm performance, and achieving sustainable competitive advantage. The combined influence of the two theories enhances the framework's conceptual richness and depth, providing more holistic and sophisticated understanding of employee engagement than either theory alone would allow. This depth of thinking enhances the framework's usefulness and potential impact.

Empirical Literature Review

This section discusses previous empirical studies related to employee engagement and firm performance using a funnel approach. The section starts with a broad scope of the employee

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engagement literature and then zooms in on studies that can identify specific factors that involve employee engagement, before homing in on studies conducted in contexts akin to ZSE-registered agro-based firms.

As a broad concept, employee engagement has been of great interest to organizational researchers because of its effect on a variety of organizational outcomes (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019). Studies have generally shown that there is a positive correlation between employee engagement and indicators of performance such as productivity, profitability, and retention of employees. For example, Kwon & Kim (2020), Kwon et al., (2024), and Hasan et al., (2021) firmly established that engaged employees have higher job satisfaction, and are more likely to exhibit discretionary effort, which subsequently can lead to higher organizational performance. These broad papers are shown as a general lead up to establish the importance of employee engagement spans across industries and organizational configurations.

Focusing on factors influencing employee engagement, various scholars have theorized on which factors play a role in employee engagement-levels within organizations. Leadership style has been emphasized as an important component of employee engagement. Transformational leadership, where leaders inspire employees to do their best work for the organization, has been linked to higher levels of work engagement (Singh & See, 2022). It is also documented that (See for example, Abu Bakar, 2024; Kaaviyapriya & Xavier, 2021) job resources, such as social support from colleagues, performance feedback, and opportunities for growing, were positively related to employees' engagement. Potential negative employee engagement factors include work-family conflict and job burnout (Ribeiro et al., 2023). These studies give us a more focused understanding of the enablers and inhibitors of employee engagement.

The review of empirical literature narrows down to studies closer to contexts relevant to the ZSE-registered agro-based firm. The study focuses specifically on Zimbabwe, so it is appropriate to better understand studies conducted in developing economies. Employee engagement is a significant contributor to an organization's performance, and is impacted by factors such as leadership, job-related resources, and balance of work and life. A recent study by Karengu (2024) examined employee engagement in the Cooperative Bank of Kenya and determined that cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement had a positive impact on

performance. The study also emphasizes significant skills development, emotional care, and physical wellbeing. Although the study focused on the banking sector, the findings have some relevance to developing economies. As employee engagement research in ZSE-registered agro-based firms in Zimbabwe is limited, this study aims to address the limited knowledge about employee engagement and focus on the specific factors that affect agro-based firms.

Employee engagement contributes significantly to the performance of an organization and is influenced by factors such as leadership, job resources and work-life balance. Employee engagement has been studied in Zimbabwe in a number of sectors, reinforcing its importance across sectors. Makumbe et al., (2025) examined the relationship between employee engagement, organizational engagement, and employee performance in the health sector in Zimbabwe, situating the impact of employee engagement on the performance of health care workers. Musevenzo et al., (2024) examined the relationship between employee engagement, job satisfaction, and decent work in the gold mining sector in Zimbabwe, reiterating the importance of employee engagement within the economy of Zimbabwe. Chada, Mashavira, and Mathibe (2022) also verified decent work to be a strong contributor to job engagement in the retail sector in Zimbabwe. Although these studies provide a great understanding of the employee engagement dynamics in Zimbabwe's health, mining, and retail sectors, research on employee engagement in agro-based firms that are registered on the ZSE is somewhat limited. Therefore, based on the Cooperative Bank of Kenya study by Karengi (2024) which revealed that cognition, emotion and physical engagement had a positive effect on performance in the banking industry, this study aims to close this gap in the literature by investigating the various factors underpinning engagement in the context of agro-based firms in Zimbabwe.

The literature on employee engagement has formed an extensive base of knowledge surrounding employee engagement, employee engagement antecedents, employee engagement outcomes, and how employee engagement leads to firm performance. To date, however, very few studies have investigated employee engagement in agro-based firms and what employee engagement may mean for firms in developing economies, like Zimbabwe. Consequently, this study seeks to develop an employee engagement framework for enhancing firm performance for a ZSE registered agro-based firm; thereby filling gaps in the literature, contextualizing the employee engagement framework for use in agro-based firms, and advancing the knowledge

within agro-based firms. Moreover, this research has practical value to organizations wishing to enhance firm performance through targeted employee engagement initiatives. Ultimately, the employee engagement framework will also make it possible to develop policy that is aimed at human resource management and organizational development in the agricultural sector, subsequently improving working conditions and increased productivity in agro-based firms in Zimbabwe and other developing economies, thus enhancing the overall livelihoods of employees employed in agro-based firms.

Methodology

Research setting and sampling procedure

This research concentrates on a Zimbabwe Stock Exchange (ZSE) listed agro-based company. Existing research on employment engagement has focused primarily on industries such as banking, mining, and manufacturing (See for example, Chada, Mashavira, and Mathibe, 2022; Makumbe et al., 2025; Musevenzo et al., 2024) while little, if any, attention has been given to the agro-based sector. Agriculture remains central to Zimbabwe's economy and significant in terms of GDP, employment, and exports (Runganga & Mhaka, 2021). The lack of research identifies the need for the study with respect to employee engagement, in order to improve productivity, innovation and competitiveness. This study adds to knowledge of employee engagement in an area less researched. It can also provide insight that can enhance firm performance in one of Zimbabwe's key sectors.

This research design used a positivist research philosophy which embraces the notion that reality is objective, consistent, and measurable by using empirical observation (Ali, 2024). The approach was appropriate given the study's aim to develop an employee engagement framework for a ZSE-listed agro-based firm, as it allowed for the use of standardized instruments, statistical analysis, and generalizable findings. This research philosophy ensured that the framework was developed using empirical evidence and not based on subjective opinion and was grounded in Social Exchange Theory and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory. Consistent with prior studies such as Saks (2006) and Rich et al. (2010), this philosophy provided methodological rigor and credibility, making the findings both comparable and applicable to enhancing firm performance in the agro-based sector.

The research used a mixed-methods research design, which involves both quantitative survey and qualitative semi-structured interview data. The quantitative data – collected through semi-structured interviews- involved measurable and statistical evidence of the connection between engagement drivers (such as leadership, work-life balance and organizational support) and firm performance indicators of productivity and profitability. On the other hand, qualitative data collected through open-ended questionnaires- provided employee perspectives and contextual information.

The choice of a mixed-methods design was justified on the grounds that employee engagement is a multidimensional construct involving cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects (Kahn, 1990; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Quantitative methods alone may reveal trends but fail to fully capture the “why” and “how” behind those trends, while qualitative methods alone may lack generalizability. By combining the two, this study achieved triangulation, enhanced validity, and offered a more holistic understanding of engagement dynamics in the agro-based firm.

The target population for this study comprised all 70 employees of a Zimbabwe Stock Exchange (ZSE) registered agro-based firm, drawn from various departments including Sales, Marketing, IT, HR, Finance, Operations, and other support units. For the quantitative component, the sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan’s (1970)¹ table, resulting in a sample of 59 participants from the total population of 70. For the qualitative component, the study applied the saturation method.

Methods of data analysis

The research used quantitative data and qualitative analysis. Quantitative data collected through structured questionnaires were coded and processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The analysis conducted descriptive statistics and used these as presentations that involved pie charts and bar graphs of the respondents' demographic profile as well as the degree of responses in the key variables.

¹ In the interest of space, reference is made to the original Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table which is available on the internet for those readers who may want to verify

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Then, inferential processes were applied to study the relationships among the study variables. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient (PCC) was used to measure the direction and strength of the association between firm performance and employee engagement dimensions. Specifically, correlations were examined between (i) work environment and firm performance, (ii) employee engagement drivers and firm performance, (iii) quality of leadership and firm performance, and (iv) work–life balance and firm performance within the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange (ZSE) registered agro-based firm.

To further establish causality and assess predictive relationships, regression analysis was conducted. The following regression model was adopted:

$$FP = \beta_0 + \beta_1 EF_t + \beta_2 ML_t + \beta_3 WLB_t + \varepsilon_t \quad (1)$$

Where:

FP represents firm performance,

β_0 is the constant, denoting firm performance attributable to factors other than employee engagement,

β denotes the coefficients measuring the influence of each predictor variable,

EF represents factors affecting employee engagement,

ML refers to management and leadership style,

WLB denotes work–life balance, and

ε_t is the error term.

This regression framework enabled the study to test whether a statistically significant linear relationship exists between employee engagement and firm performance.

Turning to the qualitative component, data obtained from semi-structured interviews were analysed thematically. Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to identify, code, and interpret patterns aligned with the study’s main and sub-objectives. The themes focused on (i) the current state of employee engagement within the firm, (ii) the extent to which employee engagement influences firm performance, (iii) strategies to enhance employee engagement, and (iv) the development of a pragmatic framework for strengthening employee engagement.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative analyses provided a robust basis for interpreting the findings and formulating an evidence-driven employee engagement framework tailored to the context of the ZSE registered agro-based firm.

Adherence to research ethics

Ethical principles guided all stages of the research process to ensure that the study was conducted with integrity and respect for participants. Prior to data collection, the researchers obtained signed informed consent from participants, confirming that they had read the study's title page outlining the purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and their rights. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly upheld: data were securely stored, with no identifying names or personal identifiers recorded. When presenting findings, due diligence was taken to ensure that no information could be traced back to any individual. In addition, the research was carried out in line with ALMA's research ethics guidelines and received ethical clearance from the management of the ZSE-registered agro-based firm prior to the commencement of data collection.

Presentation and Discussion of Results

Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic profile of the respondents indicated that the majority were males, drawn mainly from the operations department. Those occupying managerial positions, were from the mid-level, and with work experience ranging between three to five years. Specifically, 50% of the participants were male, 47.7% were female, while 2.3% preferred not to disclose their gender orientation. In terms of departmental representation, operations accounted for the largest share at 22.7%, followed by human resources (18.2%), finance (13.6%), sales and marketing (11.4%), IT (11.4%), and sales (4.5%), while 18.2% of respondents did not disclose their department. With respect to organizational level, 38.6% of the participants were at mid-level, 25% at senior level, 22.7% at managerial level, 11.4% at entry level, and 2.3% at the executive level. Regarding work

experience, 31.8% had between three to five years, 29.5% between one to three years, 25% between five to ten years, 11.4% more than ten years, and 2.3% had less than one year of experience.

Response rate and validity test

Out of the 59 questionnaires that were issued, 44 were successfully completed while 15 were not returned, giving the study a response rate of 74.6%. In order to examine the reliability of the research instrument, the researcher employed Cronbach's Alpha shown in Table 3. The researcher established a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.84, which exceeds the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70 recommended by Nunnally (1978). This indicates that the instrument demonstrated strong internal consistency, with the results not only meeting the required standard but also falling within the range generally regarded as good reliability. This result implies that the instrument used in the study was reliable and consistent internally so that the data collected was reliable and could be repeated in future similar studies. Additionally, acceptable reliability levels further enhanced the research reliability and the conclusions drawn from it.

Table 1: Results of the Cronbach's Reliability Test

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.840	25

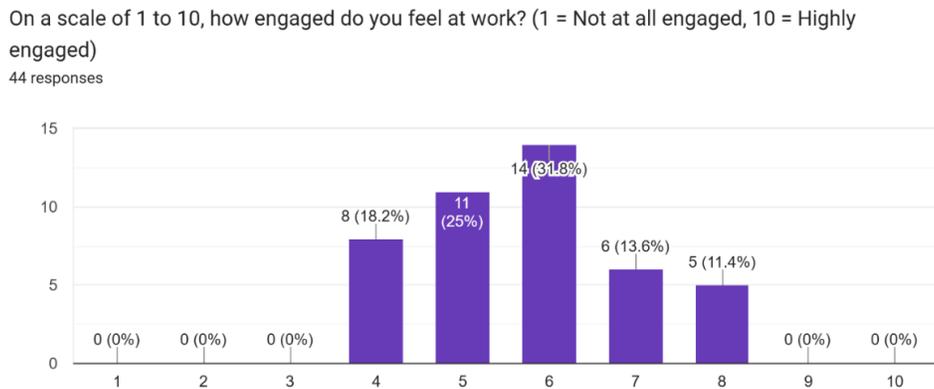
Key Empirical Insights Informing Framework Development

In developing the employee engagement framework, the research took a structured base augmented with information from mixed methods to develop the employee engagement framework. The analysis was organised around four themes: (i) examining the current state of employee engagement in the agro-based firm listed on the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange (ZSE); (ii) the impact of employee engagement on the organisational performance of the firm; and (iii) work-life balance as a basis of employee engagement.

Current State of Employee Engagement

The study assessed the current employee engagement levels at the agro-based company on a 10-point Likert scale, whereby 1 represents "not engaged at all" and 10 represents "highly engaged." In view of this, Figure 1 shows the results ranging from 4 to 8, and the highest frequency of responses were to an engagement level of 6. The data suggests that overall, the engagement is moderate at this firm, as it is displayed in the middle part of the engagement continuum.

Figure 1: Current State of Employee Engagement



Source: Author's own compilation from primary data, 2024

Although the results indicate that employees are not disengaged, they suggest that there is substantial room for improvement to move from average to above-average engagement levels. Enhancing existing engagement efforts could therefore provide the push needed to raise motivation, commitment, and performance in the organisation. These results resonate well with those by Ranjit (2022) which found that the current state of employee engagement was moderate and significantly influences retention and performance. Similarly, Quickley (2024) showed that engagement levels among knowledge workers was moderate and strongly shaped by contextual and organisational support factors, which in turn affect overall performance.

To complement the quantitative findings on engagement levels, thematic analysis was conducted to provide deeper insights into the current state of employee engagement at the ZSE-

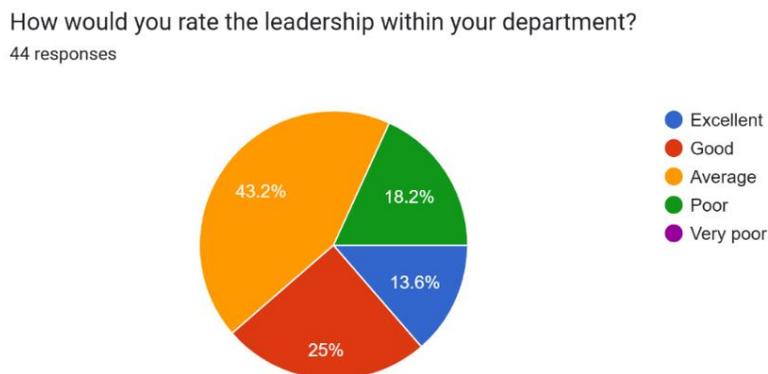
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registered agro-based firm. Thematic analysis of the responses to the question "*What is the state of employee engagement in the firm?*" revealed a mix of findings but generally moderate picture of engagement. On the positive side, findings show that the firm retained labour at an overly high rate (greater than 65%) and there was evidence that many staff are motivated, engaged and committed to their work. That said, the work-life environment was described as mostly moderately conducive, and some employees performed their work adequately, but did so without enthusiasm or alignment to the organisation's goals. Accordingly, some employees were disengaged. This mixed picture overallly resonates with the quantitative findings and suggests that while engagement exists in some fashion, it remains at a moderate level, which warrants deliberate policies and initiatives to move engagement towards a higher level.

How Employee Engagement is Impacting on Organisational Performance of the ZSE-Registered Agro-Based Firm

The quantitative findings illustrate that management and leadership practices have a substantial impact on employee engagement and, thus, firm performance. As shown in Figure 2, departmental level leadership was overall rated as average (43.2%) with a sizeable proportion rating it poor (18.2%), and only 38.6% rated it good or excellent; consequently, leadership is not driving engagement optimally. This finding resonates with Kwao et al., (2022) who found that immediate leadership has a vital influence on employee performance and associated, overall organizational outcomes.

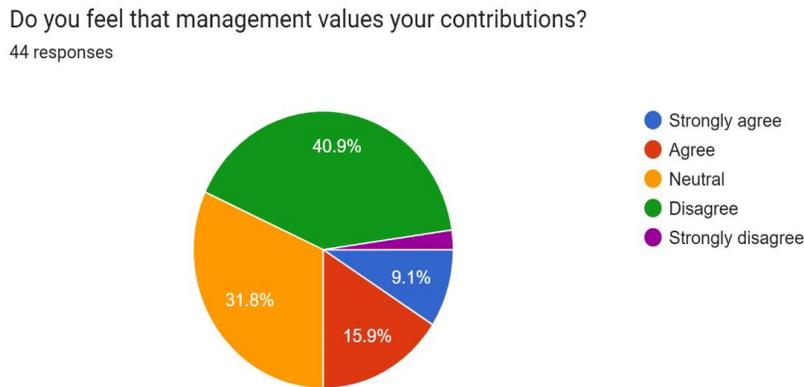
Figure 2: Departmental Leadership Ratings



Source: Author's own compilation from primary data, 2024

Likewise, opinions about whether employee contributions are recognized were mixed (Figure 3). An overwhelming 40.9% felt unappreciated, while 31.8% were neutral. Only one quarter of employees (25%) agreed or strongly agreed that management valued their contribution. This signals an inconsistency in recognition practice, which threatens motivation and commitment.

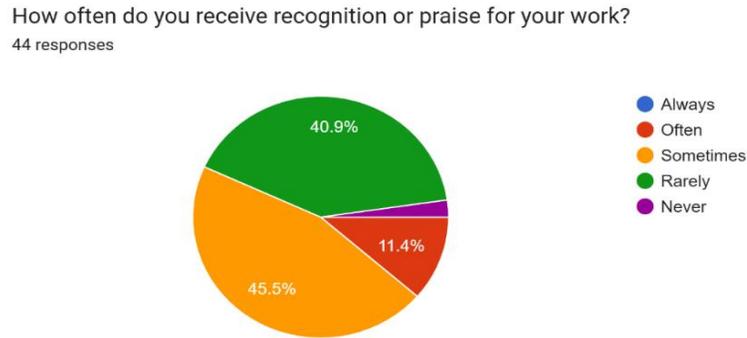
Figure 3: Perceptions on Management valuing employee contributions



Source: Drawn by the author from primary data (2024)

Figure 4 buttresses this assertion, as 40.9% of employees said they rarely received recognition for their work and 45.5% said sometimes. There was a small percentage (11.4%) that said they received recognition regularly. These findings are notable when compared to those reported by Bawah, Sadiq, & Yussif (2025) in the Ghanaian context that regular and consistent employee recognition policies improved employee retention, as it relates to the ZSE-listed agro-based firm's recognition policies. The ZSE-listed agro-based firm clearly has not yet instituted structured employee recognition policies.

Figure 4: Employee recognition



Source: Drawn by the author from primary data (2024)

Overall, the results demonstrate that weaknesses in leadership quality, limited recognition, and undervaluing employee contributions constrain engagement levels, which in turn affects organisational performance.

The qualitative evidence suggests that while the firm demonstrates elements of directive and participative leadership, the consistent application of those styles is not clear. Some staff were suggesting that they were limited in their potential by the rigidity of management styles, while others were engaged because they benefitted from collaborative, participative and supportive approaches taken by managers. These findings complement the quantitative evidence, which reported average ratings of departmental leadership, but with identified gaps in employee recognition and valuing of their contributions. Together, the findings indicate that an approach integrating strategic vision, employee support, and meaningful recognition can foster a consistent organisational practice that enhances levels of understanding and engagement, ultimately leading to improved overall organisational performance.

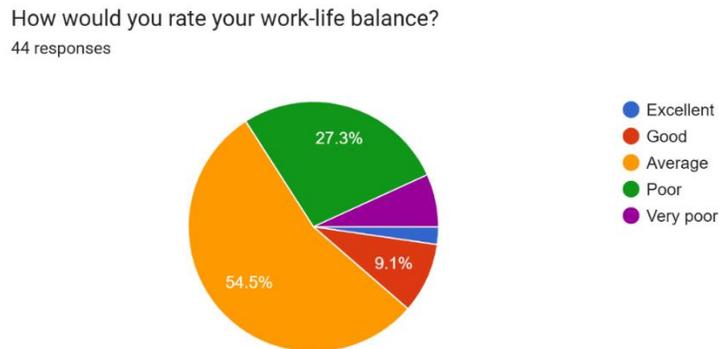
Work Life Balance

Figure 5 illustrates employees' ratings of work–life balance in a ZSE-registered agro-based firm. The findings indicate that most employees perceive their work–life balance as moderate to low. Slightly more than half of the respondents (54.5%) rated their work–life balance as *fair*, suggesting that although they are generally able to balance work responsibilities with home or family demands, this balance remains suboptimal and requires further improvement.

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More than a quarter of the employees (27.3%) rated their work-life balance as poor, which means they were dissatisfied with their perceived work-life balance. Although only 9.1% of employees felt that their work-life balance was good, only 2.3% of employees felt their work-life balance was excellent, suggesting that very few employees feel confident in balancing their work and home requirements. Interestingly, 6.8% rated their work-life balance as very poor and likely experience high levels of stress and strain. The findings suggest that the employees are moderately satisfied with their work-life balance.

Figure 5: Results of Work Life Balance



Source: Drawn by the author from primary data (2024)

Further, the qualitative evidence supports the quantitative findings, indicating that a significant proportion of employees feel dissatisfied with their current work-life balance.

Regression Evidence

As a final step, this study performed a regression analysis to examine the association between employee engagement, leadership style, work-life balance, and firm performance (FP) at a ZSE-registered agro-based firm. Equation 1 that was earlier presented is restated for convenience:

$$FP = \beta_0 + \beta_1 EF_t + \beta_2 ML_t + \beta_3 WLB_t + \varepsilon_t \quad (1)$$

Results are presented in Table 4.

Results show that for employee engagement, the beta coefficient was 0.316 and significant at 5% level. This indicates a positive relationship between employee engagement and

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firm performance that is statistically significant. The connection suggests that higher levels of employee engagement are likely to yield higher levels of performance. Focusing on leadership style, results show the coefficient was 0.212 and significance level was 0.017. This highlights the importance of leadership in firm performance. Particularly unique to measures of performance, this reinforces the impression that effective leadership practices provide positive influence toward environmental success. Turning to work-life balance, results report the coefficient was -0.169 and the significance level was 0.074. While this indicates a potential negative association to performance measures, it is not statistically significant. This implies that while work-life balance is important to employee wellbeing, its effect and direct influence on performance requires a more complex engagement within the scope of performance.

Table 2: Results of Regression Evidence

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	5.894	.720		8.189	.000
	Do you feel that your work environment is conducive to productivity?	.212	.075	.324	3.541	.013
	Communication is the most important factor that drivers engagement levels	.316	.120	.407	4.329	.012
	How would you rate the leadership within your department?	.212	.087	.323	3.382	.017
	How would you rate your work-life balance?	-.169	.092	-.278	-1.834	.074

a. Dependent Variable: Do you believe that engaged employees contribute to higher organizational performance?

An Empirical Employee Engagement Framework

The Employee Engagement Framework developed for the ZSE-listed agro-based company to enhance firm performance utilizes qualitative and quantitative insights. The framework is formed around important points that came out of the research that can facilitate an engaged workforce.

Key Components of the Framework:

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Leadership Commitment and Vision: This point includes effective leadership. It addresses the issue of management practice to be strong, supportive and participative. Since the study demonstrated that the quality of leadership is significant to employee engagement, management is encouraged to uphold a clear, sustainable vision in unison with employee goals.

Focus on Employee Well-being and Support: This point underlines the need to improve work-life balance and employee satisfaction. Although the study showed a moderate perception around work-life balance, there are various ways to enhance support services - for example, use of flexible work arrangements and wellness support - which contribute positively to engagement and to performance.

Culture and Values: It is critical to have a positive culture in place within an organization, where employees are valued and recognized for their efforts. The results identified a deficiency in recognition; therefore, the model recommends implementing formal recognition and reward systems, to better enhance to motivation and commitment.

Engagement and Participation: Involving employees in decision making can increase employee performance where they are encouraged to participate and engage. Ideally, the model provides opportunities for employees to provide feedback and have a voice in order to demonstrate ownership and alignment with the organization.

Technology and Tools: The use of technology to encourage collaboration and communication can continue to support additional engagement. This positions the need to find effective tools that help employees do their jobs effectively and increase productivity.

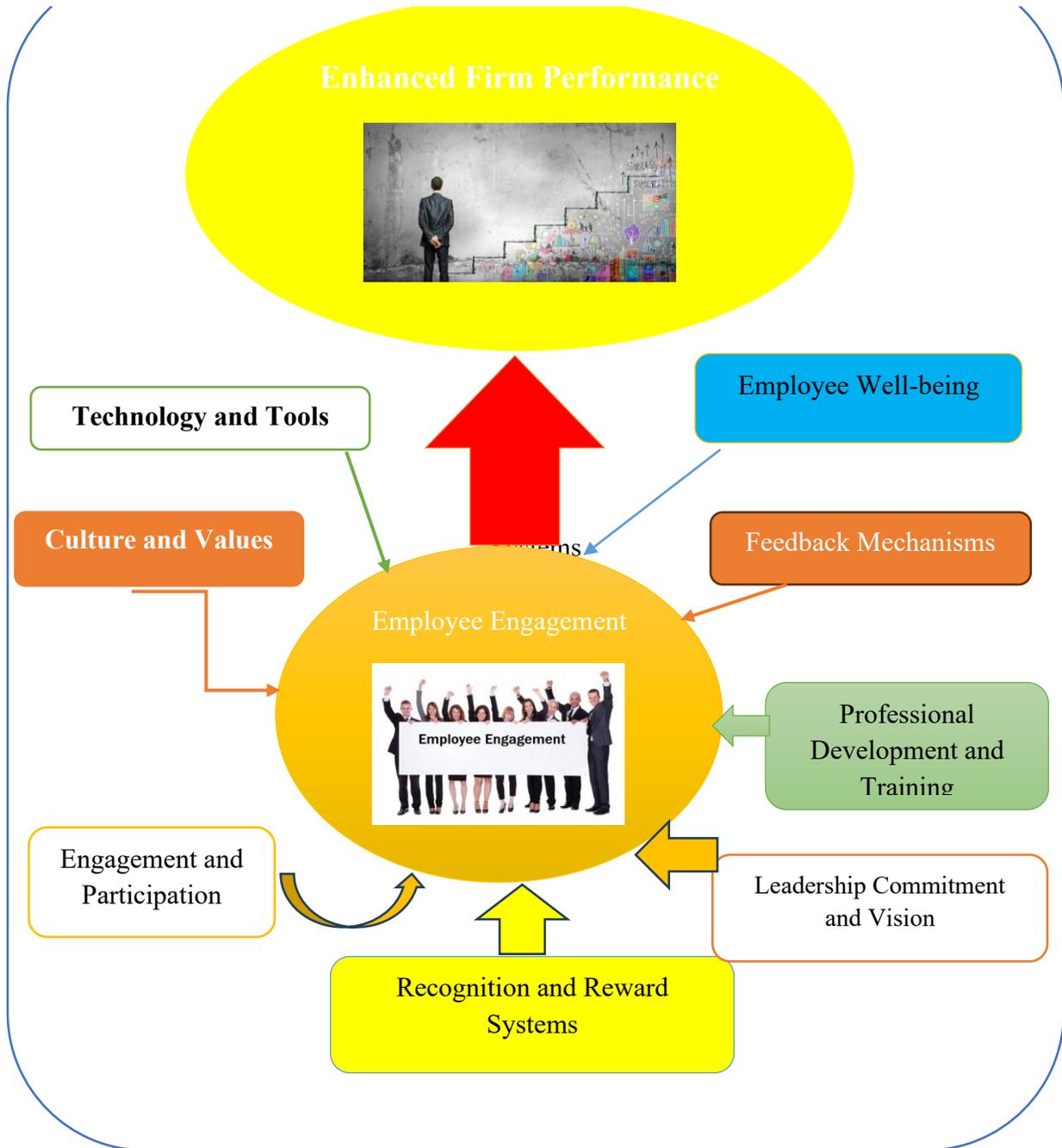
Professional Development and Training: Providing training opportunities with a focus on skill development and career progression has the potential to improve employee engagement levels. The framework emphasizes continuous learning as a driver of commitment and growth.

Feedback Mechanisms: Regular feedback mechanisms for an ongoing assessment of employee engagement and satisfaction can be conducted utilizing feedback mechanisms. The undergraduate research investigated factors related to identifying employee needs and the importance of adapting approaches based on these needs, and potential feedback mechanisms.

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Overall, the framework underscores the imperative of enhancing leadership practices and establishing structured recognition systems to build a more motivated workforce. Furthermore, the inclusion of employee well-being and support aligns with the identified need for improved work-life balance, acknowledging its complexity in relation to firm performance. By integrating these elements, the framework aims to create a cohesive approach that not only enhances employee engagement but also drives better organizational performance, ultimately fostering a supportive and high-performing work environment.

Figure 6: Proposed Employee Engagement Framework



Source: Author drawn based on empirical evidence

Conclusions And Recommendations

This research developed a comprehensive Employee Engagement Framework for a ZSE-registered agro-based company based on findings from a mixed-methods research study that explored the current status of employee engagement, the impact of employee engagement on organizational performance, and the role of work-life balance on performance. The case study found a moderate level of employee engagement with opportunities to improve. The key drivers of employee engagement were found to be leadership quality in practice (and not only quality ratings), recognition practices, and employee well-being. The employee engagement framework seeks to alleviate the key issues in relation to employee engagement by developing a supportive organizational culture, leadership quality, and recognition, by promoting consistent and well thought out recognition systems, which in turn will result in higher employee engagement levels and improved organizational performance.

The current study has merits in the literature on employee engagement, providing empirical evidence for the linkages between engagement levels and organizational performance in the agro-based sector. It also highlights leadership and recognition as important determinants of employee engagement consistent with theoretical perspectives that posit that managerial practices shape employee behaviours. It elucidates the understanding of work-life balance as a complex determinant of engagement. The results indicate that the relationship between work-life balance and performance is nuanced, noting that the relationship is complex and needs further research.

This study is relevant to organizational leaders and HR professionals. The framework has pragmatic options to engage employees by advocating for productive leadership, recognition, and support measures. Flexible work arrangements and wellness programs can enhance employee well-being directly, and structured recognition systems can help provide a culture of recognition. Organisations can leverage such practices to enhance employee motivation, commitment, and retention, thereby improving overall performance outcomes.

Limitations and future research directions

Though this study offers significant contributions; however, certain limitations remain. The use of self-reported measures is subject to bias and the study focuses on just one agro-based firm, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Future research should examine a similar framework in a varied organization, sector, and context to test the generalisability of the results.

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Furthermore, a longitudinal study would offer richer insights into the long-term ramifications of improved employee engagement practices on organizational performance. In addition, future studies could explore the mediating conditions between work-life balance and performance; this may add depth to the understanding of developing effective engagement approaches.

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